Life overseas: Getting comfy under your own skin

by Marcella Purnama | Thursday, 8 September 2011 | | (0) Comment

Tags: Culture, Indonesia, Issues, Melbourne

AS AN international student, you’re constantly confronted with cultural differences. Sometimes, it’s hard to know how to react.

The first time I was really impacted by a cultural difference was when I asked my former year 12 English teacher a question.

He was a man in his early 40s, an Australian who was teaching in Indonesia. I asked him, “Excuse me, sir, do you have any suggestions on how I can improve my English as I’m planning on taking media subjects?”

He turned to me and replied, “Of course, Marcella, but I’m no longer your teacher, you don’t have to call me ‘sir’. Just call me Rafeek.”

As an Indonesian, I was raised to address anyone older than me with a title that respected and acknowledged his or her authority. This man who was old enough to be my father, but was asking me to address him by his first name. I was shocked. Should I follow his advice? Would I be seen as someone who didn’t know how to respect her elders? Was it appropriate for a 17-year-old to be seen as an equal?

After I moved to Melbourne, I encountered even more cultural shocks. The first and biggest was back in my first year at university. I was new and a little naïve and had no idea about Prosh Week. I learnt about it the hard way.

I was in a lecture theatre with 400 others, trying hard to stay awake and listen to the lecturer rambling about social relationships in psychology. Suddenly 15 students, both men and women, ran into the theatre and onto the stage.

Now that wouldn’t have been so shocking, except they were naked.

My first thought was, “Is this even legal?” A friend sitting next to me, turned pale and squealed in horror, covering her face as these people flashed their bodies. She hadn’t even turned 17 yet! I know nothing like that would ever have happened in Indonesia.
But as time goes by, I learn more about Australian culture, adopting some quirks and neglecting others.

Australians are independent people. But as an Asian, I like to hang out in big groups and do things with others. If you’ve ever eaten in a restaurant in the city, you’ll have seen a live demonstration of this theory. The loudest table in the room is almost always Asian.

But even though I still don’t get Australian jokes, I know exactly why Melbourne is now the world’s most liveable city. The people are very friendly and the lifestyle is very relaxed.

Like most Melbourne-born people, my typical day begins by complaining about how unreliable the public transport is, although it’s undoubtedly a hundred times better than in my home country.

I then continue with a sulk about how undependable the weather forecast is. After that, I often take advantage of the relaxed Melbournian life to stop at my favourite cafe and socialise over a cup of coffee, just like the locals do.

And yet, as an Asian trying to fit into Western society, I always feel like I’m part of two worlds and two cultures. There will always be a language barrier, different foods, different values, different thoughts on certain matters and a different lifestyle.

But as Darwin said, “Humans will eventually learn to adapt”. Gradually, I’ll learn to talk just like the locals do. At the same time, I’ll still address those older than me with their proper title, if I’m speaking to other Indonesians.

I’m eating more sandwiches for lunch, drinking more coffee for breakfast and talking and writing in English 80 per cent of the time, but I still crave rice for dinner, drink Chinese tea for supper and share jokes in Indonesian with my peers.

Am I comfortable wearing two skins? To be honest, I’m not sure. But regardless of how much English I speak, how much Western food I eat and how much coffee I drink, deep down I’m an Indonesian and will always be.

It was Indonesia’s Independence Day a couple of weeks ago and there’s an Indonesian national song I’d like to leave you with:

“Even though there are many countries I’ve been to, that people say are so full of riches and beauty. But my country and my home, there, I find happiness. I will not forget my land, my homeland, I honour you”

Tanah Airku (My Homeland) – Ibu Sud

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- Sally Tam: Diane, it is really good to see you in MELD! All the best wishes for your future endeavors!
EVENTS CALENDAR

City of Melbourne Comic Club  
August 17, 2011, 6:00 pm to 7:30 pm

ASEAN Student Games Melbourne 2011  
October 1, 2011, 12:00 am to 5:00 pm

Easy Breezy Acoustic Night  
October 5, 2011, 8:30 pm to 10:30 pm

Melbourne Muslim Festival 2011  
October 16, 2011, 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm

Public lecture by Professor Chomsky  
November 4, 2011, 7:30 pm to 10:30 pm

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